DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 074 793 FL 003 409

AUTHOR	Wright, E. N.
TITLE	Learning English as a Second Language: A Summary of Research Department Studies.
INSTITUTION	Toronto Board of Education (Ontario). Research Dept.
PUB DATE	Mar 70
NOTE	16p.
EDRS PRICE	MF-$0.65 HC-$3.29
DESCRIPTORS	*Bilingual Education; *English (Second Language); *Immigrants; *Instructional Program Divisions; Migrants; *School Surveys; Transient Children
IDENTIFIERS	*Canada

ABSTRACT

This study reviews the educational background and needs of the immigrant Canadian student. His social origins are considered in a discussion of the diversity of ethnic background and educational experience which the group reflects. Remarks concerning bilingual education favor the maintenance and strengthening of existing bilingual programs. The author concludes that what is needed is a regularly updated collection of data which will readily provide current information on the numbers of different kinds of students or changing patterns of immigration. (RL)

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ED 074793

Learning English as a Second Language:

A Summary of Research Department Studies (March, 1970)

FL003 409

Research Department
The Board of Education
for the City of Toronto

LEARNING ENGLISH AS A SECOND LANGUAGE:

A SUMMARY OF RESEARCH DEPARTMENT STUDIES

E. N. WRIGHT

March, 1970

LEARNING ENGLISH AS A SECOND LANGUAGE: A SUMMARY OF RESEARCH DEPARTMENT STUDIES

INTRODUCTION

Toronto is a multi-ethnic city. That simple sentence is a cliché which hides a multitude of facts and a host of problems -- a cliché which does not recognize the school's focal position in the demands, expectations and conflicts that are part of the social life in this city. What do we know about New Canadian students? How can these pieces of knowledge be synthesized and integrated? Now is an appropriate time for the Research Department, which has attempted to maintain its neutral role as a collector and diseminator of information, to attempt a summary and synthesis of this information. The report attempts a brief answer to these questions: the hundreds of details can be found in the individual reports.

The Students

Over a third of the students in Toronto schools have learned English as a second language. Four-tenths of these students were born in Canada, the rest were immigrants. Many immigrants, however, came to Toronto schools speaking English as their native language. Indeed, one-sixth of the immigrants had learned only English, and included people from Great Britain and the West Indies (Research Department, #60, p. 72). And, many such as those from Hong Kong had received some English instruction in their land of birth (Research Department, #66). It is

evident therefore, that simple labels like "Immigrants" or "New Canadians," are not adequate to classify such a diversity of students. There are obviously students of many different backgrounds for whom the Toronto schools should provide appropriately diverse educational programmes. The problems will be different in planning for a child who begins his schooling in a Toronto kindergarten compared with older students who have had several years of schooling in their native country.

The variety of circumstances suggested above re-emphasizes the individuality of each person and situation. Nonetheless, some general statements can be made about students who learn English as a second language.

IMPLICATIONS AND INTERPRETATIONS

From the numerous studies completed by the Research Department, some patterns emerge which appear to be consistent with anecdotal reports from such sources as the multilingual social worker and the interpreter counsellors.

Bilingualism is an Advantage

The bilingual student, who has learned two languages from an early age, does better in school than his English speaking monolingual classmate (Research Department, #76 and #80). Other research supports these Toronto findings (Research Department, #75). In the Research Department studies, "doing better" was assessed using standardized achievement tests, ratings of students by their teachers and by comparing various groups of students in the same grade in terms of their average age.

The Cost of Becoming Bilingual Increases with Age

A report is being prepared on the relationship between age on arrival and academic success. The preliminary analyses plus the findings of another report (Research Department, #77) suggest that it is more advantageous, in terms of academic success, to be an immigrant at the age of six or less than to be seven or older on arrival.

Bilingualism is Achieved at Some Personal Cost

Life in a new country is not always easy for the immigrant pupil (see quotations in Research Department, #81). The student who starts in a Toronto kindergarten, but who has learned English as a second language, is initially at a disadvantage, although on the average this is overcome within two or three years (Research Department, #80). For the student

who begins school in Toronto at some later point, i.e. grade five, or grade seven or grade nine, it takes time to learn English, time in the summer, time at night, and time from the regular school programme (Research Department, #60, p. 36, and #78).

The Law of Diminishing Returns Affects the Value of Providing More Daily Instruction in English

It appears that in a full-time programme such as that offered at a Reception Centre or Main Street School, the student achieves a level of competency in English in a fewer number of months than he would if enrolled in a part-time withdrawal type programme (Research Department, #78). However, the total number of hours of instruction specifically labelled "English as a second language," seems to be less in the withdrawal than the full-time programme, i.e. Reception Centres (see also Research Department, #53). To provide even more intensified English instruction than that provided in the Reception Centres or Main Street School is not likely to speed integration much more than is now achieved.

The Rural Background of Many Immigrant Students Does Not Explain Their Difficulties

As might be expected, English speaking students with a rural background demonstrate slightly poorer performance on a number of school-related measures than their peers who have always lived in a large city. It appears, however, that a rural background is not related to the school success of non-English speaking students. The non-English speaking immigrant probably has such a language handicap that it masks any difficulties which might be a function of limited urban experiences (Research Department, #76).

The Difficulties a Non-English Speaking Student Encounters Depend in Part on His Parents' Cultural Background

A report is in preparation dealing with the performance of eight different language groups on a number of school-related measures. The

patterns of difficulty are not the same for the various language groups. Some of the differences can be attributed to culture. The differences among the European groups are not as distinct as the differences between the Chinese and the Europeans. The Portuguese and the Italians are the two groups with the most similar patterns.

Grade Five Presents Different Difficulties from Grade Nine

The previously mentioned report, in preparation, indicates that patterns of performance for a given language group are different in grade five from those in grade nine. Whether it is because of subject content or school organization, secondary school is different from elementary school and it has different consequences in terms of performance on a number of academic measures (see also the quotations from the students in Research Department, #81).

SOME CONCLUSIONS

The Toronto school system is expending considerable resources both human and financial to assist the New Canadian. This is most apparent when looking either at Toronto a decade ago or at other school systems now. The reaction of teachers (Research Department, #61) and newspapers, however, suggest that more needs to be done.

The research data suggest that the students who are recent arrivals, especially those who already had started school in their mother land are those whose problems seem the greatest. The teen-age immigrant should have a flexible programme. His previous work in such areas as mathematics and science should be reviewed and integrated in terms of the Ontario curriculum while he is learning English. The possibility of providing some instruction in his mother tongue should be explored (Research Department, #59). The social frustrations (Research Department, #81) of the teen-ager are related to his life in school. The multilingual social worker and the interpreter counsellors can provide information based on case histories to supplement the more detached, impersonal data of the research reports.

The Research Department is sometimes puzzled by the various charges and countercharges about the education of immigrants. Why do some of the speakers seem to operate on the assumption that <u>everyone</u> (especially immigrants) should be expected to complete the five-year programme? When there is a diversity of programmes intended to suit a diversity of human abilities, then not everyone can be expected to be found in only one of the programmes. Why do so many questions imply that a transition to a

new country and a new language should be accomplished without personal cost to the student? Why do some comments imply that the immigrant parents should be allowed less choice in picking the secondary school programme for their child than parents of Canadian born students? Why do questioners never seem to examine the social and economic conditions which affect the adolescent immigrants' difficulties?

The solution to some of the questions about immigrants does NOT lie in further research. What is needed, is a regularly up-dated collection of data which will readily provide current information on the numbers of different kinds of students, or changing patterns of immigration. What is needed is a better recognition of the student's world as he sees it. Maybe the schools that attend to these perceptions, the schools that are attempting to build a community-centred approach (Research Department, #59) need support.

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APPENDIX

THE RESEARCH DEPARTMENT AND NEW CANADIANS: A BRIEF CHRONOLOGY

No sooner had the first Director of Research been employed in 1959, than he began to receive questions relating to New Canadians and to learning English as a second language. The Principals' Association stimulated a survey (Research Department, #11) which provided data on the magnitude of the problems. Meanwhile, the Study of Achievement was being designed in conjunction with the Child Adjustment Services. In this long-term study of all the children who were starting kindergarten in 1961 (or junior kindergarten in 1960) provision was made for recording country of origin and language. Data from subsequent reports on the Study of Achievement, (especially Research Department, #27) provided a source of information about ethnic distributions. At the time, it seemed that nearly everyone who spoke about problems of immigrants used the numbers from this one report as their source of data!

By 1965, the concerns had mounted to the point that the Research Department prepared a brief report "Immigrants and Their Education" (Research Department, #29) which attempted to provide some perspective on the immigrants' problems. It drew on several preliminary studies including one done in cooperation with Child Adjustment Services (Research Department, #26). The report (Research Department, #29) was quoted at length by the Provincial Secretary's Department in its brief to the Select Committee on Youth, from which excerpts reached the press. This cycle was to become more common as the immigrants' problems received increased public attention and as the press reflected the dramatic aspects of these problems. In December 1965, a massive report was presented to the Board in answer to a

list of questions concerning New Canadians. Much of the material was drawn from the Research Departments' reports (Research Department, #4, #27 and #28).

It was two years later in June, 1967, that the Board directed the Research Department to conduct a "full-scale" study. The resulting New Canadian study was actually a series of related studies which are the subject of several reports. An analysis of instructional costs (Research Department, #53) was prepared and the same data used later to outline "reception areas" (Research Department, #73). The replies of teachers of English as a second language to a questionnaire (Research Department, #61) provided a description of their activities and stimulated the development of Multi-Media Packages (see Research Department, #64, #65, #66, #67, #68, #69, #70, #71, #72). To study outcomes of various instructional programmes, a number of measures had to be selected and devised:

(1) The test of English language skills (Research Department, #62) was developed;

(2) The Ravens Progressive Matrices was selected as a non-verbal test of ability (Research Department, #58);

(3) The Mathematics Department assisted in developing a test of computational skills and one of mathematics (no technical reports prepared);

(4) A picture vocabulary test was prepared (no technical reports prepared);

(5) A scale for ratings by teachers was prepared based on the work done in the Study of Achievement (no technical report prepared.)

Meanwhile, a literature review was being prepared (Research Department, #59), designed to complement an earlier review focused on the culturally deprived (Research Department, #32). A later report on French instruction in the primary grades provided a section dealing with literature on bilingualism (Research Department, #75).

Based on the testing programme, reports have been prepared dealing with New Canadians and with students learning English as a second language (Research Department, #60, #76, #77, others are in preparation). Data on Main Street School students were reported (Research Department, #78) and was supplemented by students' perception as obtained from personal interviews (Research Department, #81). In addition, analyses of Study of Achievement data provided further insights (Research Department, #80). Other studies undertaken by the Department such as the Bickford Park study (see Research Department, #79), the study of mobility (Research Department, #52) and the use of a participant observer (Research Department, #38 and #41) were related to New Canadians.

At present, besides completing some unfinished portions of the New Canadian study, the Research Department is undertaking a communication study which is dealing with the effective movement of information about the New Canadian studies to school personnel.